

Coins hold the key to Shroud of Turin enigma

By Roger Boye

A tiny bronze coin issued centuries ago by Pontius Pilate may help researchers identify the origin of the Shroud of Turin, a cloth many believe wrapped the body of Jesus.

The numismatic investigation revolves around the blurred image of a crucified man appearing on the shroud. Several experts insist that coins are covering the dead man's eyes. [The custom of placing coins on the eyes of the dead to keep eyelids closed apparently originated in ancient times.]

Scientists first noted coinlike objects over the eyes in 1974 when they used an image analyzer to put photographs of the shroud in three-dimensional relief. Much more recently, a Chicago priest said the right eye is covered by a coin known as a "lepton," showing an astrologer's staff and the letters "UCAI."

The Rev. Francis L. Filas of Loyola University, a longtime student of the shroud, made the identification after looking at enlarged photographs of the shroud printed on high-contrast paper. Coin scholars believe that Pontius Pilate, governor of Palestine, issued coins depicting an astrologer's staff from about 29 A.D. to 32 A.D.

Almost all leptons from Pilate's reign include the letters "UKAI" as part of the Greek name for Emperor Tiberius Caesar ["Tiberiou Kaisaros"], not "UCAI." Father Filas attributes the misspelling on the "shroud coin" to an ancient "minting error" and says he owns two leptons with the same spelling mistake.

But not all coin experts agree with Father Filas' findings. The coin depicted on the shroud might be another type of lepton, said Mel Wacks, editor of the journal of the Biblical Numismatic Society. And the publication's contributing editor, Robert D. Leonard Jr., disputes several statements made by Father Filas.

Precise identification of the round objects is important to authenticating the shroud itself. For example, if the objects are indeed coins made during the time of Jesus, as Father Filas says, scientists will have a big piece of evidence to use in dating the shroud.